

Taylor implements a healing sentence

Public gardening for the needy is a fruitful path for nonviolent offenders

BY TAMMY STABLES BATTAGLIA • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • July 20, 2008

Claude Johnson has put down roots in Taylor's Goodwill Garden, establishing a foundation for a life changed by digging in the soil.

Johnson, 22, who moved to Taylor from Detroit when he was 13, got his first drunken driving conviction when he was 20. His second DUI, at 21, got him 90 days in jail -- and a chance to shovel his way out of the mess his life had become. His business with a friend had imploded, his girlfriend left him and he wrecked his truck while drunk.

"I've never really grown anything," Johnson said as two other community service workers plucked weeds in the sunshine behind the Taylor Historical Society's building at Heritage Park. Then he paused. "Marijuana -- I've grown marijuana. But that's not really ..."

Gardening, he meant, in the traditional sense. But the community garden, brainstormed and established in 2002 by a local judge and a couple of friends from church, isn't traditional. This year, the 40-by-400-foot garden is set to produce 1,500 pounds of onions, radishes, tomatoes, carrots, beets, broccoli, cabbage, eggplant, corn and other vegetables for the area's needy.

"I used to be just drinking and drugging and not thinking about anybody but myself," Johnson said. He said he likes to do the heavy work -- like moving wheelbarrows full of mulch -- so others doing community service don't have to. "If I wasn't here, I'd probably be out doing what I was doing.

"Judge Salomone's doing a great thing, helping a lot of people."

Taylor's 23rd District Court Judge Geno Salomone handpicks nonviolent misdemeanor offenders to work off their community service in half of the garden. By spreading compost, planting, pulling weeds and harvesting, they help grow donations for the local food banks, Gleaners and

Fish & Loaves, and needy residents.

"Today's actually my last day, but it won't be my last day," Brandon Pavlick, 51, of Taylor said about finishing his 80 community service hours for a misdemeanor marijuana charge.

He plans to keep gardening, like the other community members who rent a plot in the other half of the garden for \$15 a year. The \$300 or so raised, plus some cash from the court and a few donations from community members, covers the \$800 annual cost for supplies for the garden.

Wayne-Metropolitan Community Action Agency nutrition program manager Shirley Moore, in the grant-based agency's office in Ecorse, funnels \$1,000 in plants to the garden, too.

"It's so quiet and peaceful," Pavlick said. "No worries. Look at it; you're surrounded by nature.

"Like I told Judge Geno, 'Where were you 20 years ago?' I have so much fun with my life now, with no drugs, no drinking. I'm so focused. And it's because of that judge."

Years ago, Judge Anthony Nicita used a community garden behind Taylor's old courthouse on Goddard Road for community service sentencing.

These days, Salomone sends the defendants to his friend Bruce Forrest, a retired retail merchandiser and master gardener who oversees the program. Forrest's wife, Joan, is head of Christian service at Our Lady of the Angels in Taylor and helped the pair brainstorm the idea. And retiree Greg Cruickshank, 60, of Taylor became an ardent volunteer two years ago after he heard about and saw the garden in the news.

From 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Tuesdays and 8 a.m. to noon Saturdays, the court-appointed workers tend to the plots.

"I look at it as I have some people who have to be here, some that want to be here," Salomone said. "And when they work together, the community benefits."

The work in the garden also is part therapy for some defendants, Salomone said.

"They've never had family or structure; they don't know what a good choice is," he said. "This is one type of teaching tool. They plant it, they see it grow. They learn respect for other people's property, respect for other persons."

Kristine Hahn, Michigan State University Extension horticulture educator for Wayne County, said there are about 150 community gardens in the city of Detroit. Figures aren't available for all of Wayne County. But, like Taylor's, all community gardens serve as a food source as well as a therapeutic outlet for those who tend them -- court-ordered or not.

"Once you realize all your food comes from the soil and pretty much from plants, you start to see the connections: that saving the planet isn't really saving the planet, it's saving us," Hahn said.

"And on a very, very basic level, they're making the world a better place."

Cathy Simons, 45, who has lived at the home next door to the garden for 18 years, said she's impressed with the work by her neighbors.

"These people who work in this garden, they have the biggest hearts," she said. "They're always friendly. They never ask for anything. They're selfless."

And they're working for a harvest, which really explodes the first of August, when the tomatoes and beans come in. Johnson said he plans to keep working in the garden long after his community service requirement is over.

"I hope to help a lot more people than we are now," Johnson said. "We are helping a lot now, but you can never help too many."

And he paused.

"And I hope I stay sober."

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